
CANCER FACTS

National Cancer Institute • National Institutes of Health

Questions and Answers About the Benefits of Smoking Cessation

Cigarette smoking is the single most preventable cause of death in the United States. The risk of premature death due to cigarettes depends on the number of years of smoking, the number of cigarettes smoked per day, the age at which smoking began, and the absence or presence of existing disease or illness at the time of quitting. The health benefits from smoking cessation (quitting) are immediate and substantial. Many factors contribute to the benefits of smoking cessation.

1. What are the immediate benefits to quitting smoking?

There are many physical benefits to quitting smoking. Almost immediately, a person's circulation begins to improve and the carbon monoxide (chemical carcinogen found in cigarettes) level in the blood begins to decline. A person's pulse rate and blood pressure, which are abnormally high while smoking, begin to return to normal. Within a few days of quitting, a person's sense of taste and smell return, and breathing becomes increasingly easier.

2. What are the long term benefits to smoking cessation?

People who quit smoking live longer than those who continue to smoke. After 10 to 15 years, a previous smoker's risk of premature death approaches that of a person who has never smoked.

3. How does the risk for the development of certain cancers change when a person has quit smoking?

Smoking cessation greatly reduces a person's risk for developing cancer, and this benefit increases the longer a person remains "smoke free." Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in both men and women, and the most significant risk factor for the development of lung cancer is cigarette smoking. The risk for developing lung cancer (and cancer of the pancreas) gradually declines until, within 10 years, the risk is 30 to 50 percent below that of a person who continues to smoke. The risk for the development of cancers of the mouth, throat, and esophagus lessens significantly 5 years after quitting. The risk of developing bladder cancer and cancer of the cervix is also reduced after just a few years of being smoke free.

4. At what age is smoking cessation the most beneficial?

Smoking cessation benefits men and women at any age. Some older adults may not perceive the benefits to quitting smoking; however, research shows that people 60 to 64 years of age who quit smoking are 10 percent less likely to die during the next 15 years than regular smokers. Individuals who quit smoking before the age of 50 see even greater health benefits. Their risk of dying in the next 15 years is half that of a person who smokes. Additional, immediate benefits (such as improved circulation, and increased energy and breathing capacity) are also good reasons for older adults to become smoke free.

5. Are there benefits to smoking cessation for persons who have an existing health or medical condition?

There are many benefits to smoking cessation for persons who are sick or who have already developed cancer. Persons who quit smoking reduce their risk for developing another primary cancer. Persons who quit also have a longer survival expectancy. Smoking cessation reduces the risk for developing infections, such as pneumonia, which often causes death in patients with other existing diseases.

6. What are the short-term side effects of quitting smoking?

Quitting smoking has short-term effects, especially for those who have smoked a large number of cigarettes for a longer period of time. People who quit smoking are likely to feel anxious, irritable, and frustrated. They may also have difficulty concentrating. Smokers who quit report an average of 4 pounds of weight gain after quitting. These side effects do subside. For individuals who kick the habit, the potential for a healthier, manageable future exists.

7. What if efforts to quit result in a relapse?

Relapse is very common among smokers. However, one should not give up quitting smoking after a relapse. In fact, most people report having tried to quit a number of times before achieving success. Smokers must consider that quitting cigarettes will result in short-term side effects, such as nicotine withdrawal. However, after an average of 3 weeks, many people are successful in their attempt to quit smoking.

8. What role do health care providers play in the smoking cessation of their patients?

Health care providers play an integral role in helping their patients quit smoking. Studies show that patients are more likely to be successful at quitting smoking when it is recommended by their physician. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has established guidelines and recommendations for effective smoking cessation programs for health care providers. You can order a copy of these guidelines by from the AHRQ at:

AHRQ Publications Clearinghouse
Post Office Box 8547
Silver Spring, MD 20907-8547
1-800-358-9295
410-381-3150
TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers) 1-888-586-6340
Web site: <http://www.ahrq.gov>
E-mail: info@ahrq.gov

The Publication Ordering Service of the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) Cancer Information Service (CIS) at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) also has information about smoking and smoking cessation. The CIS can send information and publications about smoking from the NCI. This information is also available on the CIS Web site at <http://cis.nci.nih.gov> on the Internet.

9. What additional resources are available?

Information about the health risks of smoking is also available from:

Office on Smoking and Health (OSH)
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Mail Stop K-50, 4770 Buford Highway, NE.
Atlanta, GA 30341-3724
1-800-CDC-1311 (1-800-232-1311)
770-488-5705
Fax: 770-488-5393
FAX Information Service: 770-332-2552
Web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco>
E-mail: ccdinfo@cdc.gov

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Sources of National Cancer Institute Information

Cancer Information Service

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)
TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers): 1-800-332-8615

NCI Online

Internet

Use <http://www.cancer.gov> to reach NCI's Web site.

CancerMail Service

To obtain a contents list, send e-mail to cancermail@icicc.nci.nih.gov with the word "help" in the body of the message.

CancerFax® fax on demand service

Dial 301-402-5874 and listen to recorded instructions.

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